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Speeches Honoring Abraham Lincoln

Gifford Pinchot

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INFORMATION FOR THE NEWSPAPERS
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"LINCOLN AND TODAY"

SPEECH OF GOVERNOR PINCHOT IN SPRINGFIELD, ILL.,
BEFORE THE MID-DAY LUNCHEON CLUB, THURSDAY
EVENING, FEB. 11, DURING OBSERVANCE OF THE
HUNDRED AND TWENTY-THIRD ANNIVERSARY
OF THE BIRTH OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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* "NOT TO FIRST BASE!" *
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* How many of our national leaders can declare with *
* Lincoln, "I have never had a feeling, politically, that *
* did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Dec- *
* laration of Independence? " *
* Can Mellon? *
* Can Hoover? *
* Suppose Abraham Lincoln were a candidate for Presi- *
* dent this year on his platform of human rights. *
* Where would he get with the controlling powers of *
* the Republican Convention in Chicago? *
* He wouldn't get to first base! *
* * * * *

This Nation needs the spirit of Lincoln as it has not
needed it since the Civil War. It needs his honest strength,
his homely wisdom, his devotion to the plain people, and the
sound and simple principles by which he lived and died. Never
since he led it through the greatest crisis of its history has
our country needed the Lincoln kind of leadership so desperately
as now, when millions are in the deepest distress, and tens of
millions in great trouble.

But if we can not bring Lincoln back to life, nor
turn to a living Lincoln for leadership again, we can still
learn from his life, we can still follow the trails he blazed.
We can still turn, in our hour of need, to the things he

stood for, to the ideals he held high, to the undying principles he loved and left behind him.

From coast to coast the Nation today does honor to Lincoln's name. But it is an empty tribute, a useless gesture, if we lose sight of all he worked for and fought for and gave his life to.

Many an orator will praise Lincoln today who would have hated and opposed him had he been alive. When Theodore Roosevelt died the men who had fought him most bitterly, the men who contested to the last ditch everything he stood for, at once began to sing their hymns of adulation. To them Roosevelt was no longer dangerous. His enormous power no longer drove toward equality of opportunity and the square deal. They praised him because he was no longer in their way.

Is it not so today with Lincoln?

These men are doubtless glad enough that Lincoln cannot be here to see how far our National Government has fallen away from the example he set - how little our leaders follow the ideals of the man they pretend to honor.

Lincoln was essentially a man of the people. Not because he was born in a log cabin. Not because as a youth he split rails and worked with his hands. Rather because his thoughts were the thoughts of the people, his desires their desires, and his whole purpose and action were aimed to protect and further their welfare.

He hated slavery because he believed in popular liberty. He believed that no man, black or white, should ever bow in personal or economic submission to the will of any other man. In that spirit, he held that the first duty of our government is to guard the people against every group and

every interest that might try to take their liberty from them.

From this same root sprang his deep concern for the nation as a nation. America, to him, was the stronghold of the rights of the people against political or economic domination by any selfish power from without or within. "As a nation of free-men," he once said, "we must live through all time, or die by suicide."

In the seventy years since Lincoln died, what has happened to this nation of ours, to which he gave the last full measure of devotion? What would he think of it could he see it today? What would he think of a government given over to fostering a concentration of wealth unheard of before, and blind to the simple rights of common men?

As Lincoln understood liberty, this nation is not free today. How can men be free and equal when multimillionaires grow fat and multiply while millions go hungry and cold? How can the nation be free when the policies of its government are dictated by a handful of the over-rich? How can its people be free when its God given wealth is taken from the many and so concentrated in few hands that the 1930 income of 504 men could have bought the entire wheat crop of this country, and the entire cotton crop besides? How can its business be free when 200 out of 300,000 corporations control half of its corporate wealth?

How can the nation be free when its leaders put business ahead of human welfare - when they rank money higher than men?

I heard Senator Norris say the other day that Mellon, with his millions of income each year, is the only United States Treasurer in our history who ever had three Presidents serve under

him. Is Mellon,

whose only power is money, the right kind of ruler for a free people? Has Mellon anything in common with Lincoln? Has the Administration out of which he has just been promoted? Has Hoover?

We have more to fight against today than depression. We have more to regain than prosperity. Our greatest task is to rid our people of the shackles of concentrated wealth and power - to make ourselves once more a nation of free men.

How many of our national leaders can declare with Lincoln, "I have never had a feeling, politically, that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence?" Can Mellon? Can Hoover?

Suppose Abraham Lincoln were a candidate for President this year on his platform of human rights.

Where would he get with the controlling powers of the Republican Convention in Chicago?

He wouldn't get to first base.

How many politicians now in power have ever had a feeling, politically, that did not spring from the interests of rich contributors to campaign funds, from politics for profit, or from their belief that big business ought to run this country?

Lincoln well knew that the principles of the Declaration would be threatened in times to come. He knew how future prosperity might dull the edges of the nation's political perception - and how eagerly that chance would be seized on by those who wanted only to use the people's government to further their own private gain. It was prophecy when he said:

"The assertion that 'all men are created equal' was

of no practical use in effecting our separation from Great Britain; and it was placed in the Declaration, not for that, but for future use. Its authors meant it to be a stumbling-block to all those who in after times might seek to turn a free people back into the hateful paths of despotism. They knew the proneness of prosperity to breed tyrants, and they meant, when such should re-appear in this fair land and commence their vocation, that they should find left for them at least one hard nut to crack."

Prosperity-bred "tyrants" - the word is Lincoln's - are over us today. And they have brought upon the people the suffering that goes with tyranny, which is another name for government by autocrats, or plutocrats, or international bankers, or public utilities, or any other control without the consent of the governed.

Consider for a moment the depression and what is its main cause. Its main cause, all will agree, is that production has outstripped purchasing power. Why? Because too little of our national income goes to those who spend their income in buying - the farmer, the wage-earner - and too much to those who, having more than they can spend, invest their income in more production.

So purchasing power falls behind producing power instead of balancing it, and the depression strikes us mainly because of the enormous, unhealthy, and unreasonable concentration of wealth in a few hands - a concentration which our government has the power to stop, but which instead of stopping it has promoted by every means in its power.

And now the same men whose greed brought the depression upon us have opposed and blocked every attempt to have the nation help supply the necessities of life to those

whom the concentration of wealth has stripped bare, and stripped of their right to work as well.

Would Lincoln have refused to tax the wealthy to give food to the unemployed? Would he have allowed workingmen and their families to suffer through three winters without bringing the government to their assistance? Would he have proposed a great national public works program to give men jobs?

Above all, would Lincoln have given his first thought to big business, in the face of human distress? Would he have turned his attention only to capital--would he have mustered the nation's resources only to the aid of railroads and banking?

Lincoln, who said: "Labour is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration," would he, while helping capital, have refused help to men, women, and children in want?

"We all declare for liberty," he once said, "but in using the same word, we do not all mean the same thing. With some, the word 'liberty' may mean for each man to do as he pleases with himself and the product of his labour; while with others, the same word may mean for some men to do as they please with other men and the product of other men's labour."

Lincoln had a name for that sort of liberty which opposes government planning for industry, government security for workers, government limitations on the terms of work that employers may force from employees. That sort of liberty which permits "some men to do as they please with other men and the product of other men's labour" Lincoln called tyranny. It is still tyranny today.

Again Lincoln spoke of "the two principles that

have stood face to face from the beginning of time, and will ever continue to struggle. The one is the common right of humanity, and the other the divine right of kings. It is the same principle in whatever shape it develops itself. It is the same spirit that says, 'You toil and work and earn bread, and I'll eat it.'

No better definition could be given of the spirit of concentrated wealth that infests our nation now. The ruthless exploiting of the wage-earner and the farmer - the unequal division of profits that dried up purchasing power and was the main cause of the depression - taxation that releases the over-rich at the expense of the average man - the system which allows stock market gamblers to amass huge fortunes without doing a stroke of work - all these are shameful examples of the twentieth century version of what Lincoln meant by the divine right of kings.

"This country," Lincoln said, "with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it." Certainly he would have used those institutions to save the country and its natural resources for the people to whom they belong, and to keep this nation free from the dictation of financial and industrial autocrats. Today the United States is in the hands of big business and the great international bankers.

And that is precisely what Abraham Lincoln warned us against.

Lincoln said of the common people, "Let them beware of surrendering a political power which they already possess, and which, if surrendered will surely be used to close the door of advancement against such as they, and to fix new

disabilities and burdens upon them, till all of liberty shall be lost." But liberty, though lost, can be regained. The people, through the power of the ballot, can still rise in their own defense. They can still cast off the chains of concentrated wealth and power that have deprived them of their liberty. And if they have the power, they also have the right.

Listen to the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that, whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it."

It is not the form of our government that the people need to change, it is the substance. Under the ancient form a usurpation has grown up that is far more dangerous than any foreign invasion - a usurpation based on cunning, not on force, but all the harder to overcome on that account.

What our government is being used for today is not the greatest good of the greatest number but the greatest wealth of the smallest number. The magnates who control it are seeking, through that control, the utmost concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the smallest possible number. Their gain is the people's loss. God knows they are succeeding in their evil purpose.

Let the people use the power that is their's by every right, and return this government to the rule of the people.

Let them ask for nothing that was not demanded in the Declaration and established in the Constitution. Let them ask for nothing that is not American to the core. But let them free themselves and their children from the chains of special privilege and concentrated wealth. Let us have majority rule once more in the United States.

I call on the men and women who honor Lincoln for the living principles he embodied, and not merely because he is dead. I call upon them to put in force once more the principles upon which this nation was founded. I call upon them to use their strength, the strength the Constitution gives them, the strength that is in their votes once in four years. This nation can never be free while its President is a servant of concentrated wealth.

Oh, I can hear the over-rich exclaim in horror at what I say. I can see the lifted hands of those who have waxed fat. I can catch the denunciations launched against the man, any man, who dares to tell the truth about them and the government they have acquired. But what about the rest of us?

What about the rest of us who believe in America as something more than a source of riches? What about the millions from whom the magnates have drained their substance? What about the millions who are hungry and cold? What about the plain people whom Lincoln loved?

Is there any good reason why the people should not rule in America? They can if they choose.

They can if they will listen to Lincoln, who said:

"When the people rise in mass in behalf of the Union and the liberties of their country, truly may it be said, 'The gates of hell cannot prevail against them.' * * * I wish you to remember, now and forever, that it is your business and not mine; that if * * * the liberties of these people shall be lost, it is but little to any one man, but a great deal to the millions of people who inhabit these United States, and to their posterity in all coming time. It is your business to rise up and preserve the Union and liberty for yourselves, and not for me."



